



Podcast: Student Affairs One Thing

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Summary: We chat with Dr. Kirk Manning, Vice President and Dean for Student Development at St. Thomas Aquinas College.

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B E G I N T R A N S C R I P T

Stuart Brown: Welcome to Student affairs One thing, a podcast that asks a simple question of seasoned student affairs professionals - what is one thing you have learned that has helped shaped your professional career? I'm your host Stuart Brown, founder of StudentAffairs.com, one of the most accessed websites by student affairs professionals. On our pages, we have the most cost effective job posting board, listing hundreds of open student services positions, a wide range of webinars and a virtual exhibit hall. We would like to thank our sponsor, the National Society of Leadership and Success, the largest leadership honor society in the nation, providing an accredited five step leadership development program for members to build their leadership skills with chapters at over 700 colleges across the country. The N. S. L. S. delivers guaranteed student engagement, increased student retention and is financially self-sustainable. Learn more at NSLS.org/our/program.

On today's program, I am very pleased to have Dr. Kirk Manning, Vice President and Dean for Student Development at St. Thomas Aquinas College. Kirk has been in the field for 30 years.

He has also served as the Associate Provost and Dean at Widener University and Vice President at the State University of New York in Orange. Welcome to the program, Kirk.

Dr. Kirk Manning: Thank you Stu. Happy to be here.

Stuart Brown: So, Kirk, what is your one thing?

Dr. Kirk Manning: If I'm going to pick one thing, I think what I'm gonna pick is that we need to have a passionate commitment and an unending commitment to helping people, individually and collectively. And that may not be the most profound thing that that anyone is going to say in in your series. But as I looked at all of this, I realized that we are here to help students be successful. And we do that on an individual level and we do that on a collective level. And sometimes the two conflict. And I thought about sometimes when I really had to take some actions against an individual for the good of the whole, and that's a really tough, tough place to be in. And I thought of a number of different interactions with students, with colleagues, with younger staff who have gone on to grow in the field and how we went through some moments together and I hope that either I or someone I worked with, someone on the team was able to be there for that one moment. that might not have seemed huge to us when we looked at it from the perspective of being a vice president of an institution. But for that one person at that time, they really needed us. And we were there for them. And as I've gone through and as I go through every day and I think about what I should be doing, I find myself stopping to say, Well, how does this help? How is this helping? What good, what positive, what difference is this going to make?

And it takes me right back to the roots of what we all learned all those years ago in grad school about student affairs and student development and how we're here to provide that appropriate balance of comforts and distress. You know, we comfort the distressed and we distress the comfortable, its challenges and supports, and we want to help people when they need us. We want to challenge people to grow. So if I'm trying to sum it all up, I'm going to have to say that the one thing I've learned is that we're here to make this experience better for people when they're transitioning in, when they're here and when they're transitioning out.

And we have an important role to play at all of those steps. And I think back at the interactions that I've had with various folks along the way that have either helped them transition and transition out or do something while they were here. And it's been kind of neat to think back on some of those instances that have happened over the past 30 years.

Stuart Brown: Is there somewhere along the way that really helped solidify this sort of one thing?

Dr. Kirk Manning: You know, I think what has solidified it for me is some of the communications I've had in this past Covid year, and maybe people are just communicating more than they have.

But you wonder how enduring the experience might have been or how relevant it might have been. And maybe folks have had time on their hands. But just in this past year, I heard from two people I haven't heard from in the longest time. One of them was an RA who I worked with so many years ago. He just reached out and we started talking on LinkedIn. Another was a student government officer from way back early in my career when I was advising SGA and to hear back from those two folks after all this time and think I wonder if I had any impact on their lives and to have them reach out and say, hey, we remember this, this was impactful for us. You know, one of them is actually working in higher ed and to remember that even though it seems distant, you do hear from people and you hear back from people. And I'm kind of an introverted guy, and I'm not the most gregarious person. So sometimes I wonder what impact I'm having. And it's great to get that feedback because we don't always give it to each other. We don't always receive it from each other. And so I started thinking after you and I talked about a lot of different experiences and different students and folks I've heard back from afterwards. You know, we interact with people while they're here, and we go through that process of recognizing them and maybe getting a thank you for the help or some closure to an experience. But what really made the difference for me is folks I've heard from years later. It's been cool. Some of them have been international students who came here, and it was a tough time for them. I'm thinking of one person in particular who arrived here, and as soon as he got here, he had a toothache and a dental problem on the first day. And new country, new language learning his way around and some of us helped and got him to a dentist.

And his parents never forgot that, you know, and I'm still in touch with him. He's finished a graduate program. He's going on to great things back in his home country. And we just developed a really good relationship from one little anecdote that, okay, we got somebody who needs a helping hand, but it gives you the opportunity to really help someone when they've got a personal problem that is solvable. But for them, it's like, Oh, my gosh, what am I gonna do with this? And I thought back to a lot of instances like that and then people you see or hear from and the cool things that they're doing. So I think that we help individuals, and that's one of the things that I like doing on a small level in an individual level at a small campus.

Stuart Brown: I really like what you were talking about with the helping of students. That we reach out to these students and getting those phone calls years later. And I think sometimes in our field we don't know what the impact is. I mean, students might say thank you very much, maybe at graduation, maybe because you helped with an event. But we don't know the full impact until years later because they don't know the full impact. They might be going through their careers and realize, Oh, my goodness. When I was at St. Thomas, we did this or Dr. Manning helped me with this and maybe that's why they're calling because they had an epiphany and let me go to the source and let that person know.

Dr. Kirk Manning: It's great to hear back from people and to keep those connections even when they're loose and infrequent. But just to know that you had some positive impact out there. One of my favorite quotes is that "the only legitimate use of power is to help people" and I keep that in mind.

Sometimes, I think that too often we get caught up in all the craziness of what we have to do. That's sometimes what I like to call administrivia. It takes so much of our days. But I think that the one thing that we have to do is to focus on how we help people individually and collectively.

Stuart Brown: Kirk, thank you for sharing your Student Affairs One Thing. I think it's very important for individuals to hear. So what you were talking about with working with students, whether it's going to be in a positive way or may be instructive, educational, that this is something that we do well, and we don't always know how that's going to affect and how that's going to impact students until years later. But, like with your experience, it's so great to have people get back in touch with you to say I remember and thank you and you helped me.

Again, I've been speaking with Dr. Kirk Manning, Vice President and Dean for Student Development at St. Thomas Aquinas College. You have been listening to the Student Affairs One thing, a podcast that asks a simple question of seasoned student affairs professionals - What is one thing you have learned that has helped shape your professional career? I've been your host. Stuart Brown, the founder of StudentAffairs.com, one of

the most accessed websites by student affairs professionals. I hope you will join us next time for another episode of the Student Affairs One thing.

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